

VIRGINIA:

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF LOUDOUN COUNTY

LaDONNA SNELLBAKER,)

DIANA HAYS)

Plaintiffs,)

v.)

Case No. _____

CARL "BEN" NETT,)

Individually and Officially as)

Vice Mayor of Purcellville)

and)

CORPORATION OF PURCELLVILE a/k/a)

TOWN OF PURCELLVILLE, VIRGINIA,)

Jointly and severally)

Defendants.)

COMPLAINT

COME NOW your Plaintiffs, LaDonna Snellbaker, (hereinafter "Snellbaker") and Diana Hays (hereinafter "Hays") by counsel, and complains and requests relief against Carl "Ben" Nett, (hereinafter "Nett") in his individual capacity and in his capacity as Vice Mayor of Purcellville, and the Corporation of Purcellville, a/k/a The Town of Purcellville, Virginia, (hereinafter "the Town" or "Purcellville"), both jointly and severally. In support thereof, Plaintiff states as follows:

INTRODUCTION

This action arises out of false and defamatory statements published by Nett, both in his individual capacity and on behalf of the Town of Purcellville in his role as Vice Mayor of Purcellville, and concerning Town of Purcellville employees Snellbaker and Hays. It is an action for money damages alleging defamation *per se*.

JURISDICTION AND VENUE

1. Jurisdiction is proper in the Circuit Court of Loudoun County because pursuant to Section 17.1-513 of the Code of Virginia, this is a case at law greater than \$50,000.00; and pursuant to Section 8.01-328.1 of the Code of Virginia, all defendants committed tortious conduct in the County of Loudoun;

2. Venue is proper in Loudoun County because Plaintiffs' claims arise primarily from unlawful conduct occurring in Purcellville, Loudoun County, Virginia.

PARTIES

3. At all times herein, Snellbaker was an adult citizen of the Commonwealth of Virginia. She is an employee of the Town of Purcellville, acting as the Director of Human Resources.

4. At all times herein, Hays was an adult citizen of the Commonwealth of Virginia. She is an employee of the Town of Purcellville, acting as the Assistant Town Manager, and, at certain times herein, the Acting Town Manager.

5. Hays and Snellbaker are private individuals and not elected officials. They have not, at any point in time, thrust themselves into public controversies and/or stated publicly any personal position on Town of Purcellville policies or procedures.

6. Defendant Nett was at all times relevant to this Complaint a resident of Virginia, officer/former officer of the Purcellville Police Department, member of the Town Council of Purcellville, and Vice Mayor of Purcellville.

7. Defendant Purcellville at all times herein was a town corporate, in the name and style of The Town of Purcellville, and as such did exercise, and had the right to exercise, the powers and privileges conferred upon it by its charter and which were, or may be hereafter delegated to towns in accordance with the Constitution or laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia. A town acts, by charter, through its Town Council. *Westbrook, Inc. v. Falls Church*, 185 Va. 577 (1946). The allegations against Defendant Purcellville do not describe actions taken within the powers and privileges conferred upon it by law.

FACTS

8. In February 2024, Defendant Nett announced his candidacy for a seat on the Purcellville Town Council.

9. Nett, as part of a “slate” of candidates, campaigned on a platform that included eliminating spending and/or reducing costs for the Town.

10. Nett was, at the time he announced his candidacy, a sworn officer with the Town of Purcellville Police Department.

11. At least one citizen complaint was received by Hays regarding Nett distributing campaign material that included images while in uniform and driving a Purcellville Police Department cruiser.

12. On or about September 1, 2024, the Blue Ridge Leader published information regarding the candidates for Town Council. Nett's comments listed potential positions to eliminate to reduce costs, and stated, without any citation, that "nearly half a million dollars [is spent] in combined yearly compensation for a Town Manager and an Assistant Town Manager."

13. Additionally, Nett's campaign materials stated he has "a life-long aversion to corruption and incompetence. "We're a town of fewer than 9,500 residents with a bloated and inefficient government that is sucking more and more of our paychecks. What reductions you ask? Nearly half a million dollars in combined yearly compensation for a Town Manager and Assistant Town Manager along with a current job announcement for a nearly \$200k Director of Admin. A top heavy PD with four six-figure salaries...a finance department that retains original staffing levels long after the county assumed the accounting burden for the collection of town property taxes."

14. Both Hays and Snellbaker found Nett's comments harassing and demeaning and viewed the comments as personal attacks.

15. In September, 2024, Sara Lombraña was hired as the Deputy Chief for the Town of Purcellville Police Department, to serve under Chief Barry Dufek.

16. In October 2024 at a community event, Nett was reported to Snellbaker and Hays by a citizen for handing out Purcellville Police Junior Officer stickers while campaigning in his personal capacity.

17. On November 5, 2024, Nett was elected as Council member for the Town of Purcellville effective January 1, 2025.

18. On November 8, 2024, Nett met with Snellbaker regarding his potential dual role as Town Council member and Town Police Department employee.

19. Also just days after the election on November 8 Nett requested multiple documents from the current Town Manager Bremseth, to include the complete organizational hierarchy for the entire Town government – all departments, positions, position descriptions, employee's dates of hire, and salaries.

20. Later in November, Snellbaker questioned Nett as to when he intended to resign as police officer, based on a Town policy/handbook provision (Section 10.3.B1) that prohibited dual roles.

21. Despite signing and acknowledging the Town policy/handbook several months earlier, Nett apparently did not realize the handbook contained a prohibition on Town employees serving in an elected role on Town Council.

22. Nett indicated to Snellbaker that he had no intention of resigning as police officer.

23. Nett further demanded that the Town Attorney identify by name the individuals or individual who authored and/or inserted section 10.3.B1 of the July 2024 Purcellville employee handbook. This appears to be targeted personally at Snellbaker.

24. The Town Attorney was also advised by Nett to identify and preserve all documents, including emails and text messages, phone records, drafts, etc. related to the handbook amendment.

25. The Blue Ridge Leader, a publication known to be sympathetic to Nett's various positions, published an article in December, 2024 naming "senior management of the Town of Purcellville" and later Snellbaker individually, as responsible for the policy manual revision that the article deemed unfairly targeted Nett. **Exhibit A.**

26. On January 8, 2025, Nett, stated during a Town Council meeting that section 10.3.B1 was inserted in violation of state law, and was an attempt to overturn an election.

27. Hays responded that it was a former employee who drafted the personnel manual, and that the Town had hired a consultant to use the Town of Leesburg's manual as a template. Nett remained upset regarding the manual issue, and took personal affront to what he took as both Hays' and Snellbakers' handling of the issue.

28. Nett then made a motion to terminate the existing Town Manager, and appoint the former Mayor and his friend, Kwasi Fraser, as interim Town Manager. The motion passed.

29. On or about January 23, 2025, Chief Dufek resigned and retired from the department, and Lombraña was elevated to Interim Chief.

Termination of Officer Nett and Involvement of Town Employees

30. On or about February 7, 2025, Acting Purcellville Police Department Lieutenant William Michael Holman initiated an internal affairs investigation regarding Nett's work performance.

31. This stemmed in part from Snellbaker, solely in her capacity as Purcellville's Director of Human Resources, having received documentation questioning Nett's use of sick leave on his timesheet while attending the Virginia Municipal League conference.

32. Holman met with Nett on February 13, 2025, and reminded him of the procedure when using sick leave and what is required to return to work.

33. In response, Nett filed an "ethical advocate" complaint on February 14, 2025.

34. On February 18, 2025, Nett was placed on administrative leave by Holman, pending an internal affairs investigation.

35. Snellbaker contacted Kwasi Fraser regarding the administrative leave paperwork received from the police department.

36. To avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest, the internal affairs investigation was conducted by Prince William County Police Department.

37. On February 19, 2025, while on administrative leave, Nett called Sergeant Raymond Starkey, and "offered" him the position of Acting Chief of Police. Despite having no authority to offer such a position, despite the position of Acting Chief already having been filled by Lombraña, and despite being on leave for serious violations of policy, Nett encouraged Starkey to take the job.

38. Starkey declined. Nett later “offered” the position to Sergeant David Camp, on February 20 and 21, 2025, who similarly declined. Nett offered to increase Camp’s salary to \$125,000 per year.

39. Sergeant Camp indicated that Nett “offered” the job to him with the understanding that Camp, in return for the job, would kill the internal affairs investigation into Nett and return Nett to full active duty.

40. Nett indicated that he intended on becoming chief, and his overall goal was to effectuate Lombraña’s firing.

41. In his calls with Camp, Nett stated that “Lombraña is defying the law,” indicating that Lombraña was engaged in unlawful or illegal activities.

42. On February 20, 2025, Snellbaker participated in a call with Lombraña and counsel, the result of which was the recommendation of Nett’s termination.

43. In retaliation for any alleged part the town employees played in placing him on leave, Nett, in his capacity as Vice Mayor and Town Council Member, then inquired of the Town Attorney how to eliminate town staff positions with a Town Council vote.

44. On February 21, 2025, Lombraña served an Advanced Notice of Termination on Nett, regarding IA 2025-0087 and IA 2025-0061.

45. The termination was to be effective February 28, 2025.

46. The notice detailed grounds stemming from Nett’s attending a meeting on January 10, 2025, with the Town Manager, Assistant Town Manager and Town Clerk (for his role as Vice Mayor/Council Member) while on duty, marking out as on

a “directed patrol.” Additional grounds include Nett’s calling in sick on January 29 and 30, 2025, while attending a conference of the Virginia Municipal League (for his role as Vice Mayor/Council Member) and utilizing sick leave.

47. The termination date was stayed pending the Town Manager, Kwasi Fraser’s review.

48. On February 24, 2025, Nett was placed on the Brady/Giglio list by the Loudoun County Commonwealth Attorney.

49. Placement on the Brady/Giglio list is an entirely discretionary act performed at the pleasure of the Commonwealth Attorney, to which there is no right of appeal.

50. On March 6, 2025, the Town Council met in closed session to discuss the issue of Nett’s impending termination. Both Lombrana and Snellbaker were asked to leave the meeting prior to deliberations.

51. On March 12, 2025, Snellbaker and Hays received a letter from an anonymous citizen regarding concerns with Nett.

52. On March 20, 2025, while still on administrative leave, Nett again “offered” the position of Police Chief to Starkey, who again declined. Nett informed Starkey that he believed he would be back to work within two weeks, and that Lombrana would be terminated.

53. During the Town Council meeting on March 25, 2025, Nett made a statement that he would remain with the Purcellville Police Department until he decided otherwise, or until such time as the Town Council decides to follow the

recommendations of Hays and Snellbaker to eliminate the police department in its entirety. Nett insinuated that it was Hays and Snellbaker who were the proponents of eliminating the police department.

54. Specifically, Nett stated, “I will remain with the Purcellville Police Department, not because Kwasi Fraser says so, but because the law says so. I will remain there until I decide otherwise, or until such time as this council decides it will indeed follow the recommendations of town staff, Assistant Town Manager Hays, and Director of Human Resources Snellbaker, to eliminate the Purcellville Police Department in its entirety, those who have conspired to defame my character and I believe overturn the results of our most recent elections.”

55. Hays and Snellbaker did not, in fact, advocate for the elimination of the Police Department, nor did they conspire to defame Nett’s character or to overturn an election. Nett’s statements were categorically false, and designed to defame and embarrass Hays and Snellbaker, and deflect public attention from Nett’s current placement of administrative leave and impending termination.

56. The following day, March 26, 2025, Hays and Snellbaker received an email from a reporter for the Loudoun Times-Mirror attempting to confirm that Hays and Snellbaker recommended abolishing the Police Department. **Exhibit B.**

57. Interim Town Manager Fraser responded, and confirmed that neither Hays nor Snellbaker have ever taken that position. **Exhibit B.**

58. On April 1, 2025, the Blue Ridge Leader published an article stating that two senior Town of Purcellville staff members advocated eliminating the police

department in its entirety. The senior staff members refer to Hays and Snellbaker.

Exhibit C.

59. Hays then sent a letter to Nett to formally address his false and defamatory statements. **Exhibit D.**

60. Upon information and belief, Kwasi Fraser assented to Nett's termination on April 3, 2025.

61. Nett was terminated from the Purcellville Police Department on April 4, 2025.

62. On April 8, 2025, Town Council again met. Drawing on his background as a former town employee, Nett stated that he had seen opportunities for cost-saving measures firsthand, reinforcing his support for the fiscal approach he attributed to Hays and Snellbaker. Council Member Stought condemned Nett for misrepresenting the words of Snellbaker and Hays regarding police department budget discussions.

63. Council Member Khalil moved town staff to prepare an ordinance to rescind Chapter 42 of the town code, which would eliminate the police department. Nett supported the motion.

64. Khalil later stated at the April 22, 2025, Town Council meeting that it was "senior staff" that brought up the subject of eliminating the police department due to financial constraints, and references Hays and Snellbaker as those senior staff members.

65. Separately, Nett exercised his right to grieve his termination.

66. Fraser recused himself from the termination proceedings, but not before appointing the Town's representative to the grievance panel, effectively stacking the deck in favor of Nett.

67. Hays, as Acting Town Manager, (due to Fraser's recusal) upheld the termination on May 8, 2025.

68. The grievance panel decision reversed; opting to reinstate Nett.

69. Angered at Hays and Snellbaker's role in the grievance process and their exposure of the falsity of Nett's statements regarding Hays and Snellbaker's alleged "position" regarding eliminating the Police Department, Nett retaliated.

70. At the June 10, 2025 Town Council meeting, Nett stated he would support a proposal regarding a reduced water rate increased, with the provision that Town Council would give direction to the Town Manager to further reduce spending by at least \$800,000 to \$1 million, to address the Town's "spending problem," an oblique reference to eliminating Hays' and Snellbaker's positions.

71. On July 7, 2025, Nett indicated in an email to Fraser that he would move to eliminate certain town employee positions, including that of Hays and Snellbaker.

Exhibit E.

72. A motion to eliminate the positions was drafted, but never discussed in a public meeting.

73. Also during the summer of 2025, the Town of Purcellville appealed the grievance panel decision to the Circuit Court of Loudoun County, who declined jurisdiction.

74. The decision on the grievance appeal next fell to the Commonwealth Attorney. The Commonwealth Attorney for Loudoun County recused himself, and a Special Prosecutor was appointed.

75. The Special Prosecutor appointed to the case, Hon. Eric Olsen, concluded that the grievance panel decision was not consistent with either Purcellville's written policy or the applicable state written (and codified) grievance procedure.

76. Additionally, Nett is currently under indictment for four counts of computer trespassing, one count conspiracy for bid-rigging, and one count fraudulent commercial dealing, relating to Nett's actions as Purcellville Town Council member and Vice Mayor.

77. Nett was added to the Virginia law enforcement decertification database on December 2, 2025.

78. Nett's allegations against Hays and Snellbaker are categorically false, defamatory, and insinuate Hays and Snellbaker committed crimes and/or ethical breaches during their tenure as senior Purcellville employees.

79. Hays and Snellbaker have sustained reputational damage as a result of Nett's false and defamatory statements.

80. Additionally, Hays and Snellbaker have endured an unhealthy and stressful work environment as a result of Nett's continued degradation and defamatory remarks, and continued threats to eliminate their positions.

COUNT I DEFAMATION PER SE

COUNT I DEFAMATION PER SE
SNELLBAKER AND HAYS V. NETT

81. Plaintiff incorporates the allegations contained in the previous paragraphs as if as if fully set forth herein.

82. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, “defamation” is defined as a false statement of fact published or communicated to another person that causes injury to the reputation of the subject of the statement.

83. “Defamation *per se*” takes place when the defamatory statement involves defamatory words that (1) impute commission of a criminal offense involving moral turpitude, (2) impute infection with some contagious disease, (3) impute unfitness to perform the duties of an office or employment, or want of integrity in the discharge of such duties, or (4) prejudice a person in his profession or trade. One does not have to prove damages as they are presumed. *Great Coastal Express v. Ellington*, 230 Va. 142, 146-47 (1985).

84. Additionally, “[w]hen particular skill or ability is necessary in the performance of the plaintiff’s vocation, an imputation that attributes a lack of skill or ability to the plaintiff tends to harm the plaintiff in his business or profession.” *Lamb v. Weiss*, 62 Va. Cir. 259 (2003) (citing Restatement (Second) of Torts, § 572, comment c).

85. Nett’s statements are not mere opinions, because they are subject to being proven or disproven. See *Cashion v. Smith*, 286 Va. 327 (2013).

86. Nett, knowing his factual assertions were false, or with a reckless disregard as to whether his statements were false, made his statements at Council

Meetings and in email correspondence, as specifically referenced in paragraphs 53 through 71 herein.

87. The statements contained herein represent more than Nett's personal opinion, assert "facts," and are actionably and objectively false.

88. At no time did Hays or Snellbaker conspire against Nett, or taken action to overturn a lawful election.

89. At no time did Hays or Snellbaker engage in criminal, immoral, illegal, or conspiratorial conduct.

90. Nett knew the statements to be false.

91. Nett knew that allegations of senior Town Officials being engaged in criminal, immoral, illegal, and conspiratorial conduct goes to the core fitness and qualifications for duty. Nett published his statements with reckless disregard to their truth or falsity and acted intentionally in causing the statements to be published.

92. In addition, these statements impute a lack of ethical conduct and want of integrity upon Hays and Snellbaker in performing the duties of their occupations as Assistant Town Manager and Director of Human Resources.

93. Nett's statements were made with an extreme lack of prudence. Nett published these statements intentionally, maliciously, and knowing them to be false, or with a reckless disregard as to their truthfulness. Nett did so with a reckless disregard for the consequences of his actions. Nett consciously disregarded the risk of this harm.

94. Alternatively, Nett negligently published the above statements.

95. Nett had a duty not to not make false defamatory statements that maliciously interfered with Hays' and Snellbaker's reputation and called into question their fitness for employment.

96. Nett consciously, deliberately, and maliciously disregarded the risk that publishing these statements would damage Plaintiffs' reputation.

97. Alternatively, Nett negligently disregarded the risk that his statements would damage Plaintiffs' reputation.

98. Nett's intentional act in publishing the defamatory statements constitutes an utter lack of prudence and amounts to defamation *per se*.

99. Nett's actions are not justified by circumstances out of his control. Such blatant disregard for Plaintiffs' personal and professional reputation is unjustifiable and shocks the conscience of fair minded people.

100. Nett's breach is a direct and proximate cause of Plaintiffs' loss of reputation, humiliation, and mental anguish, and amounts to defamation *per se*.

101. Nett's actions were *per se* damaging to Plaintiffs.

WHEREFORE, with respect to the defamation claims against Nett, Plaintiffs respectfully request that this Court award consequential damages in the amount of Ten Million Dollars (\$10,000,000.00) punitive damages in the amount of Three Hundred and Fifty Thousand Dollars (\$350,000.00) plus pre- and post-judgment interest and for other such relief as this Court deems proper.

COUNT II DEFAMATION *PER SE*
SNELLBAKER AND HAYS V. TOWN OF PURCELLVILLE

102. Plaintiffs incorporate the allegations contained in the preceding paragraphs above as if as if fully set forth herein.

103. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, “defamation” is defined as a false statement of fact published or communicated to another person that causes injury to the reputation of the subject of the statement.

104. “Defamation *per se*” takes place when the defamatory statement involves defamatory words that (1) impute commission of a criminal offense involving moral turpitude, (2) impute infection with some contagious disease, (3) impute unfitness to perform the duties of an office or employment, or want of integrity in the discharge of such duties, or (4) prejudice a person in his profession or trade. One does not have to prove damages as they are presumed. *Great Coastal Express v. Ellington*, 230 Va. 142, 146-47 (1985).

105. Additionally, “[w]hen particular skill or ability is necessary in the performance of the plaintiff’s vocation, an imputation that attributes a lack of skill or ability to the plaintiff tends to harm the plaintiff in his business or profession.” *Lamb v. Weiss*, 62 Va. Cir. 259 (2003) (citing Restatement (Second) of Torts, § 572, comment c).

106. Nett utilized his position as Vice Mayor/Town Council Member to lend credibility and veracity to his defamatory statements, and to encourage various news outlets to publish his statements. Nett’s use of his position with the Town of Purcellville implicitly places Purcellville’s imprimatur on Nett’s actions.

107. Nett utilized his Purcellville email and wrote in the capacity as “Vice Mayor.”

108. Nett defamed Plaintiffs during various Town Council meetings while utilizing his platform as Vice Mayor, and speaking during the “Council Comments” portion of the meetings.

109. Nett’s statements are statements attributable to Purcellville, through Nett as Vice Mayor.

110. The Town’s statements through Nett are not mere opinions, because they are subject to being proven or disproven. See *Cashion v. Smith*, 286 Va. 327 (2013).

111. The Town through Nett, knowing its factual assertions were false, or with a callous disregard as to whether his statements were false, made his statements, with actual malice, and/or reckless disregard for their truth or falsity, with the intent to injure Plaintiffs and cause their employment termination.

112. The statements contained in the Exhibits attached represent more than the Town’s personal opinion, assert “facts,” and are actionably and objectively false.

113. At no time did Hays or Snellbaker engage in criminal, immoral, illegal, or conspiratorial conduct.

114. The Town knew or should have known the statements to be false.

115. The Town knew or should have known that allegations of senior town officials engaging in criminal, immoral, illegal, or conspiratorial conduct goes to the core fitness and qualifications of Plaintiffs with respect to their ability to work in

their chosen profession. The Town through Nett published these statements with reckless disregard to its truth or falsity and acted intentionally in causing the statements to be published.

116. In addition, these statements impute a lack of ethical conduct and want of integrity upon Plaintiffs in their performing the duties of their occupation.

117. The Town's publication was made with an extreme lack of prudence. The Town through Nett published these statements intentionally, maliciously, and knowing them to be false, or with a reckless disregard as to their truthfulness. The Town did so with a reckless disregard for the consequences of its actions. The Town consciously disregarded the risk of this harm.

118. Alternatively, the Town negligently published the above statements.

119. The Town had a duty not to not make false defamatory statements that maliciously interfered with Plaintiffs' reputation and called into question their fitness for employment as senior town operatives.

120. The Town consciously, deliberately, and maliciously disregarded the risk that publishing these statements would damage Plaintiffs' reputation.

121. Alternatively, the Town negligently disregarded the risk that its statements would damage Plaintiffs' reputation.

122. The Town's intentional act in publishing the defamatory statements constitutes an utter lack of prudence and amounts to defamation *per se*.

123. The Town's actions are not justified by circumstances out of its control. Such blatant disregard for Plaintiffs' personal and professional reputation is unjustifiable and shocks the conscience of fair minded people.

124. The Town's breach is a direct and proximate cause of Plaintiffs' loss of reputation, humiliation, and mental anguish, and amounts to defamation *per se*.

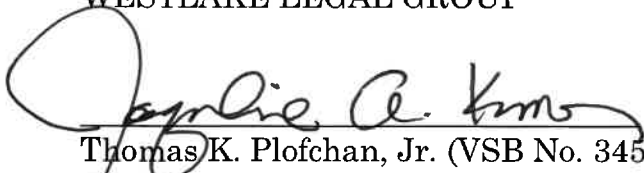
125. The Town's actions were *per se* damaging to Plaintiffs.

WHEREFORE, with respect to the tort claims against the Town of Purcellville, Plaintiff respectfully requests that this Court award consequential damages in the amount of Ten Million Dollars (\$10,000,000.00), punitive damages in the amount of Three Hundred and Fifty Thousand Dollars (\$350,000.00) plus pre- and post-judgment interest and for other such relief as deemed proper.

TRIAL BY JURY IS HEREBY DEMANDED AS TO ALL COUNTS OF THIS COMPLAINT.

Respectfully submitted,
DIANA HAYS
LaDONNA SNELLBAKER
By Counsel

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Purcellville Police Officer of the Year given ultimatum following town council win

BY VALERIE CURY

On Nov. 19 after congratulating Purcellville Police Officer of the Year, Ben Nett, on his successful election to Town Council, senior management of the Town of Purcellville notified him that he has two choices—either resign his position as a town police officer or resign from Town Council.

Based on the revised Town of Purcellville Employee Handbook, Section 10.3.B.1, "No employee shall continue in their position with the Town after election

to any public office in the Town."

This newly created policy was inserted into the July 2024 revision of the Town of Purcellville Employee Handbook, which had not been updated since 2005. Prior to this revision, no reference to the new policy existed in the handbook. By this time Nett had met all criteria to run for election.

The updated handbook was distributed in July 2024 without prior notice to employees and was made available on the employee section of the town's website for their access. However, despite its availability, no effort was made to

specifically inform Nett about the policy, which directly pertains to his election to Town Council.

It wasn't until the end of November that Nett was notified that it was his responsibility to read the updated handbook. This raises concerns about why such an important update was communicated so poorly—and why it was introduced at this time.

Also, during his campaign and while on duty, and at the same time this new policy targeting Nett was implemented, he was taken into the police suspect interview room at police headquarters, disarmed,

and questioned at length regarding an alleged complaint from another candidate running for Town Council.

Nett was also asked about his employment plans after the election, and who else he has spoken with on Town Council. That complaint was found to be unsustainable, and to date the alleged complaint has been withheld from him.

According to a source familiar with the Purcellville Police Department, speaking on condition of anonymity, an officer under formal Internal Affairs investigation

CONTINUED ON PAGE 25 >



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Merry Christmas & Happy Holidays!

"I met with Glenn yesterday to review a number of electrical needs in a house we recently purchased. Appleton Campbell is my go-to company for my HVAC, plumbing and electrical needs because of their quality of work and staff."



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The Blue Ridge Leader is pledged to the letter and spirit of Virginia's and HUD's Equal Opportunity Housing Policies. Virginia's Fair Housing Law makes it illegal to advertise any preference, limitation or discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, age, marital status and handicap. The newspaper will not knowingly accept advertising for real estate that violates the Fair Housing Law. Our readers are hereby informed that all dwellings advertised in the paper are available on an equal housing opportunity basis. For more information about Virginia's Fair Housing Law, or to file a Fair Housing complaint, call the Virginia Fair Housing Office at 804.376.8530; toll-free 888.551.3247; for the hearing impaired: 804.527.4295; email - fair_housing@dpw.virginia.gov; web: www.fairhousingvpnet.org.



OPINION: AFFORDABLE HOUSING,
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

These are not rhetorical questions. They are fundamental issues that deserve concrete answers before a single dollar of taxpayer money is spent or a single zoning ordinance is changed. Absent those answers, this isn't a plan—it's a pipedream. And here's the rub: we live in an era of powerful tools like artificial intelligence

and digital twin technology. These can model the financial, environmental, and social impacts of any proposal with remarkable precision. Yet, instead of bringing data and transparency into the conversation, we're handed vague promises and political platitudes.

Let's pause the rhetoric and demand the facts. Show us the models. Prove the need. Lay bare the costs—financial, logistical, and

social. Affordable housing shouldn't be a slogan; it should be a carefully considered, data-driven strategy that uplifts the community without undermining its future.

Until then, Purcellville risks becoming a cautionary tale: a small town sold on big promises, only to awaken to the nightmare of broken budgets, overwhelmed infrastructure, and diminished quality of life. Let's not let that happen here.

OPINION: THEY'VE LOST, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

Eliminate the personal property tax on automobiles. Voters would see the Supervisors as heroes.

The real fiscal villain is the school system. It is proposing \$1.5 billion, yes, billion, of new capital spending, even as enrollment has been flat. Among that proposal is \$221 million for construction of a new Park View High School. That seems insane.

Here's an idea called the 5% Plan. The County and every one of its departments must cut their next-year's budget by 5%. For the year after that, the budget gets another 5% cut, and so on. In five years, the County's spending would be cut by around \$2 billion, leaving government \$5 billion to spend. That should be sufficient if luxury projects like the wayfaring project and like some Board travel, are eliminated and if the Board has the nerve to reject the School Board's spending addition.

This budget cutting would cause our government some pain, and assuredly prompt it to review its programs and staff, eliminating anything that's not critical.

In my former profession, we always said that the most expensive part of a building's budget was its architect's pen or keyboard. We'd go through the cost estimates line-by-line, cutting out fluff, until the budget was tight.

Charles Houston's career was developing around \$6 billion of major office buildings throughout the south. The tallest was 617 feet, the largest was 1.2 million square feet. Every single building came in on time and within budget. He consulted on real estate with several familiar corporations that rank high on the Fortune 500 list, served as an expert witness in litigation regarding real estate, and occasionally lectured on real estate at the university level.

OFFICER OF THE YEAR, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

is entitled to receive a copy of the complaint filed against them.

Regarding the issue of disarming a uniformed officer, such action would only occur if the officer were to be immediately terminated or relieved of duty.

The source also stated that Officer Nett has been the subject of targeted actions over the past several months, citing examples such as unofficial reprimands for publicly highlighting the department's lack of sustained 24/7 police coverage and for criticizing management over the practice of assigning officers to work 12-hour overnight shifts alone.

The source referenced an Oct. 31 email in which Nett was reprimanded for passing out Junior Purcellville Police Officer stickers to children at the October Tag Sale, claiming he was using the stickers to benefit his campaign—only to be countered by the fact that Nett had been

provided the stickers, for distribution at the Tag Sale, by a supervisor as part of a community outreach effort.

Also, on Nov. 4, election eve, Nett received notice from the Deputy Chief that he was "randomly" selected for drug screening.

Nett's candidacy for Town Council has been approved by the Virginia Conflict of Interest and Ethics Advisory Council, which cites VA Code 15.2-1512.2, outlining the rights of First Responders to engage in political activity.

This includes Nett's right to run for and hold public office while maintaining his employment with the Police Department. He would have to recuse himself from matters dealing exclusively with the Police Department.

As of press time LaDonna Snellbaker, Director of Human Resources, has given Nett until Dec. 3 to resign his position with the police department.

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Hays, Diana

From: Fraser, Kwasi
Sent: Wednesday, March 26, 2025 5:44 PM
To: Karen Graham; Snellbaker, LaDonna; Hays, Diana; Council Member Nett, Ben
Subject: RE: Vice mayor comments

Hi Karen,

I want to clarify that no one from my management team, included in this email, has ever stated that the police department should be abolished. What was expressed by members of my management team were concerns about the long-term sustainability of the department—specifically regarding officer retention and our ability to remain competitive with larger jurisdictions. It was also noted that we are currently in a cycle where, for every two officers we hire, about two leave. Additionally, a significant portion of the HR challenges we've faced over the years have involved the police department. So, these are complex issues that warrant thoughtful discussion and strategic planning.

Regards,
Kwasi Fraser
Interim Town Manager
Town of Purcellville
221 S. Nursery Avenue
Purcellville, VA 20132
(571) 479-9611
Kfraser1@PurcellvilleVa.gov

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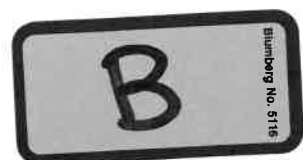
From: Karen Graham <kgraham@loudountimes.com>
Sent: Wednesday, March 26, 2025 5:25 PM
To: Snellbaker, LaDonna <lsnellbaker@purcellvilleva.gov>; Hays, Diana <dhays@purcellvilleva.gov>; Council Member Nett, Ben <cmbnett@purcellvilleva.gov>; Fraser, Kwasi <kfraser1@purcellvilleva.gov>
Subject: Vice mayor comments

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of the organization. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Good afternoon, I wanted to follow up on Vice Mayor Nett's comments last night where he said you had recommended abolishing the police department. Is this true or could you please clarify? Thank you!

Best regards,
Karen

Karen Graham
Community Editor, Loudoun Times-Mirror
703.443.6284 office
703.629.8530 mobile
kgraham@loudountimes.com



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Today

Trapped in the Net: Officer Ben Nett's battle against political retribution

BY VALERIE CURY

Purcellville Police Officer Ben Nett has been the target of Internal Affairs investigations since announcing his candidacy for the Town Council. After securing a seat, the accusations intensified, culminating in recommendations for termination and placement on the Brady List by Commonwealth's Attorney Bob Anderson—driven by allegations from senior management in the Purcellville Police Department, certain members of senior town management, and his town council political opponent.

After over 20 years in national security with the U.S. Secret Service, the CIA, and the Department of Defense, Ben Nett transitioned into a second career with the Purcellville Police Department in June 2022. By December, he had graduated first in his class at the Northern Virginia Criminal Justice Training Academy.

In 2023, Nett was the co-lead investigator and arresting officer in a high-profile case involving a juvenile armed with a loaded, stolen handgun about to board a school bus bound for Blue Ridge Middle School. Nett also led several major financial crime investigations targeting Purcellville residents, which helped dismantle a nationwide theft and money laundering ring, culminating in a federal arrest in Miami.

In February 2024, he announced his candidacy for Purcellville Town Council, looking to bring his dedication and service to the community.

Shortly after his candidacy was



announced, things changed for this 2024 Officer of the Year. What followed was a series of events that would soon reveal a troubling pattern of politically motivated internal investigations and harassment, aimed at undermining his reputation and career, and also overturning an election.

Part of Officer Nett's campaign platform focused on streamlining local government, with particular emphasis on restructuring the Police Department. He argued that the department had become top-heavy and struggled to provide round-the-clock coverage. During his campaign, Nett pointed out that the position of Deputy Chief of Police was created in 2017 in response to a lawsuit filed by then-Chief Cynthia McAlister against two

of her Sergeants, and was an example of government largesse and unnecessary bureaucracy.

In July 2024, the first Internal Affairs investigation was initiated following an alleged complaint from a political opponent. The complaint accused Officer Nett of using his position to intimidate an opponent and discourage his candidacy. During the investigation, Nett was disarmed by the investigating Lieutenant and questioned in the suspect interview room at police headquarters.

The questioning extended beyond the scope of the complaint, with inquiries about which council members Nett had spoken to and whether he intended to remain with the Police Department if elected. Ultimately, the complaint was not sustained, yet Nett was denied a copy of the complaint—even after submitting a Freedom of Information Act request.

On Sept. 23, 2024, newly hired Deputy Chief Sara Lombrana called Officer Nett into her office to discuss a campaign door hanger featuring Nett and his running mates. She objected to, but did not dispute two claims: that the department was not providing 24/7 coverage and that the department was top-heavy, with four command staff members drawing six-figure salaries but contributing little to patrol and investigations.

The second Internal Affairs investigation occurred on Sept. 24, 2024, following a complaint about a dog locked in a car. When Officer Nett arrived, the dog was in the owner's arms outside the car,

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and licking her face. Upon arrival everything seemed fine and Nett chose not to activate his body camera. However, the caller later contacted the Police Department, complaining that no action had been taken. This led to an alleged Body Worn Camera violation, which is typically at the officer's discretion. Despite policy exceptions and verbal guidance from the former Deputy Chief, the allegation was sustained.

Further complicating the situation, another supervisor, with access to the department's camera uploads, had evidence showing command staff members not activating their cameras in similar circumstances. Despite objections from Nett's immediate supervisor, Deputy Chief Lombrana ordered the IA investigation to be sustained.

On Oct. 31, 2024, while on leave, Officer Nett received an email from Deputy Chief Lombrana reprimanding him for distributing "Junior Purcellville Police Officer" stickers at a community event 26 days earlier, while campaigning.

The stickers had been given to Nett by a Sergeant for the purpose of promoting

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12 »



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BEN NETT, CONT. FROM PAGE 1

ongoing community engagement. In the email, Lombrana wrote, "Behavior of this nature, particularly if part of a pattern, can result in adverse employment action up to and including termination."

On election eve, Nov. 4, 2024, Nett received an email from Lombrana informing him he was "randomly" selected for drug screening.

On Nov. 19, 2024, following his Nov. 5 election victory, Human Resources Director LaDonna Snellbaker sent Officer Nett an email requesting his resignation from either the Town Council or the Police Department. She cited Section 10.3.B.1 of the Town of Purcellville Employee Handbook, which states, "No employee shall continue in their position with the Town after election to any public office in the Town." This policy had been added during a revision of the Employee Handbook in July 2024 during the campaign period. The last revision was in 2005.

On Nov. 22, 2024, the Executive Director of the Virginia Conflict of Interest and Ethics Advisory Council affirmed that Nett was exercising his rights under Virginia state law. Specifically referencing Virginia Code Section 2.2-3107 (B) (1) (ii), the director confirmed that the law clearly applies to Nett's situation, allowing him to remain a member of the Police Department while serving on the Town Council. The policy has since been removed because it is not legally enforceable.

During a Town Council Special Meeting on Jan. 8, Acting Administrative Lieutenant Mike Holman had a loud angry outburst when the new Interim Town Manager was appointed—violating the department's General Orders.

On Jan. 10, while on duty, Officer Nett attended a brief agenda work session at Town Hall, at the request of the Interim Town Manager, who has administrative control over the Police Department and to whom the Chief of Police reports directly.

Nett marked himself as being on "Directed Patrol"—the proper designation for marking a shift while in service. Directed patrols are used for activities such as observing traffic from a parked position, running errands, eating lunch, and other duties from which the officer can respond to a call for service at any time.

The aforementioned work session was the first reason for Nett's recommended termination and placement on the Brady List.

On Jan. 15, two senior Town of Purcellville staff members initiated a meeting with the Interim Town Manager and advocated eliminating the Purcellville Police Department in its entirety. They noted the Police Department has been the source of most of the HR complaints over the last decade.

On Jan. 28, just before midnight, unable to sleep and suffering from lingering flu-like symptoms—including temporary loss

of his voice—Nett emailed Acting Administrative Lt. Holman to notify him that he would be on sick leave, extending into his scheduled weekend off. Nett was also dealing with an aggravated knee injury, which was later diagnosed as "patellar tendinitis," with x-rays suggesting a possible slight meniscus tear.

On that same day, Nett communicated with both Mayor Chris Bertaut and Council Member Carol Luke, informing them that he was feeling unwell and unable to drive, making it unlikely that he would be able to attend the Virginia Municipal League conference scheduled for the morning of Jan. 30.

Originally, Nett had planned to depart on the evening of Jan. 29, after his shift, and take leave on Jan. 30. After a day of rest, Nett decided to travel to Richmond that evening with Luke. Due to his knee injury, she drove him both to and from Richmond.

On Feb. 7, Acting Administrative Lt. Mike Holman instructed Officer Nett to come to his office, where he was informed of two additional Internal Affairs investigations and corresponding Orders of Confidentiality. The allegations were related to Nett's attendance at the Jan. 10 agenda work session and his use of sick leave on Jan. 29-30. Holman refused to answer any questions, stating that the IA investigations would be handled by Sergeant Jessica Tacha of the Prince William County Police Department.

After further aggravating his right knee and facing the ongoing stress from the personal campaign against him, Nett notified the Police Department and the Town Manager, on Feb. 8, that he would be on sick leave until further notice.

At the conclusion of the Town Council meeting on Feb. 13, Acting Chief Lombrana approached Nett and handed him an envelope containing a memorandum from Acting Administrative Lt. Holman, who had just been promoted. The memorandum requested that Nett provide notice of his expected return to work by Monday, Feb. 17, and included threats of insubordination if he did not comply.

On Feb. 13, Nett attended a council meeting while on sick leave. Council meetings are scheduled to avoid conflicts with members' regular shifts and work responsibilities. Additionally, it's possible to be unfit for duty as a police officer and still be fully capable of attending and sitting through a council meeting.

On Feb. 14, Officer Nett submitted a formal ethics complaint against Lombrana, Holman, and the Director of Human Resources, and became the second sworn member to file a formal ethics complaint against Lombrana and Holman.

As instructed, Nett emailed Lt. Holman on Feb. 16—copying Deputy Chief Lombrana—to provide his expected return-to-work date of Feb. 27.

On Feb. 17, Lt. Holman texted Officer Nett's personal cell phone, instructing

him to respond by 2 p.m. or he would "be stopping by your residence." Officer Nett had already communicated with Lt. Holman, as instructed, providing his return-to-work date. Since Nett was under no obligation to respond to work calls or messages while on leave, he instead notified the Town Manager. Holman did not visit Nett's residence.

At 9:58 a.m., on Feb. 18, Lt. Holman emailed Nett, informing him that he was being placed on administrative leave and demanding that Nett turn in all issued PD property—including his badge, gun, uniforms, and credentials by 4 p.m. The memorandum stated: "By this action, your police powers and authority are suspended until such time as a determination is made regarding your ability to return to duty."

The memorandum explained that this action was being taken because Nett's "lack of a doctor's note constitutes insubordination. Insubordination is grounds for relief and possible termination."

However, this contradicted Lt. Holman's order from Feb. 13, to which Nett had already complied by providing his anticipated return-to-work date—an email to which Lt. Holman had not responded. That order explicitly stated, "You will not be able to return to duty until this physician's statement is provided." However, Nett had not yet returned to duty.

This was another reason in which Nett was recommended for termination and placed on the Brady List.

Forty-four minutes later on Feb. 18, at 10:42 a.m., Lombrana sent an email to the entire Police Department stating, "Officer Nett is relieved of duty and is on administrative leave" while noting he is not allowed in the Purcellville Police Department building unless accompanied by herself or Holman. Holman delivered the same message to Nett's residence, while Nett was at the pharmacy, alarming his wife.

Sixty-one minutes later, at 11:43 a.m., Nett received a voicemail, followed by an email at 11:50 a.m. from the Prince William County Sergeant regarding the Internal Affairs investigations initiated on Feb. 7—eleven days earlier.

On Feb. 19, the Interim Town Manager and Town Attorney met to discuss the targeting of Officer Nett and reviewed ethics complaints filed against Acting Chief Lombrana and Lt. Holman. Following the Town Attorney's advice, the Interim Town Manager emailed Lombrana, directing her to immediately reinstate Officer Nett to full duty until legal guidance and a formal investigation were completed. The directive also reminded Lombrana of the Town Code requirement to promptly transmit charges and witness information for proper investigation, stressing full compliance moving forward.

Lombrana did not comply with the lawful directive to reinstate Nett and in further defiance, Holman again texted

Nett's personal cell phone ordering him to respond to the Prince William County Police regarding the Internal Affairs investigations. However, based on the direction from the Town Manager, Officer Nett was instructed not to surrender his badge and credentials or participate in the inquiry.

On Feb. 21, the Town Attorney said he had reached out to the Prince William County Sergeant tasked by Lt. Holman with leading the IA. However, she stated that she no longer needed to discuss the matter—just three days after her initial outreach to Officer Nett.

On February 21, a courier delivered two memorandums to Officer Nett from Acting Chief Lombrana, notifying him of sustained allegations and an intent to terminate his employment. The memos, titled "Advanced Notice of Discipline," stated that Nett had five days to respond to the charges, with termination effective Feb. 28, if no response was received.

Before the Feb. 25 Town Council meeting, Officer Nett was informed by the Town Attorney that Commonwealth's Attorney Bob Anderson had placed him on the Brady List due to sustained charges from Acting Chief Lombrana and based on Council Member Erin Rayner's interview with Prince William's investigator.

Notably, Anderson's letter, dated Feb. 24, came two days before the Feb. 26 deadline for Nett's response to the charges pursuant to the Law Enforcement Officer's Procedural Guarantee Act. At the Town Council meeting, former Chief Cynthia McAlister, former Chief Barry Dufek, Acting Chief Lombrana, and Lt. Holman were present and observed directing smirks at Officer Nett.

Former Chief Cynthia McAlister and her husband attended the Purcellville March 25 Work Session, where they were seen clapping and mocking Vice Mayor Ben Nett. McAlister's husband also used foul language directed at Nett, and audible to this reporter who was seated nearby. McAlister also campaigned for the Stan Milan slate in the November 2024 election.

During the week of Feb. 26, the confidential Internal Affairs investigation of Officer Nett was leaked to two Loudoun newspapers. The leak detailed the allegations, which were meant to remain confidential, along with quotes from Commonwealth's Attorney Anderson's letter placing Officer Nett on the Brady List.

On March 19, nearly a month after the notice of termination and being put on the Brady List, Nett was given the opportunity to answer the sustained charges at a so called pre-disciplinary hearing at Prince William County Police Headquarters. There, Nett provided evidence with supporting affidavits demonstrating that all of the sustained charges against him were both unfounded and politically motivated.

April 1, 2025

Council member Carl "Ben" Nett
Town of Purcellville
Via email delivery to cmbnett@purcellvilleva.gov

Council member Nett,

This letter is to formally address and object to the false and defamatory public statements you have made about me. You have been spreading inaccurate and damaging statements regarding my character and professional reputation. Specifically, I can identify three statements that you publicly voiced during Town Council meetings. Allow me to outline them for you:

- January 8, 2025, 1:37:50 - you publicly stated that "I personally witnessed a member of the town staff greet the interim town manager in what I believe to be a hostile and unprofessional manner, and I do consider that an error in judgement."
- January 28, 2025, 1:12:47 – you public stated that "there were ideas put forth to the Interim Town Manager about eliminating the Police Dept".
- March 25, 2025, 1:28:27 – you publicly stated that "I will remain there until I decide otherwise or until such time as this Council will indeed follow the recommendations of town staff, Assistant Town Manager Hays and Director of Human Resources Snellbaker, to eliminate the Purcellville Police Dept. in its entirety."

While I may not have been explicitly named in some of these comments, it is evident to both you and me who they were intended to target, and their public dissemination have caused harm.

Additionally, you have made threatening comments pertaining to town staff in general, such as "maintaining a bloated staff", "create a leaner and more efficient town government", and "cut town government while improving efficiency of services, I'm confident of that".

These above statements are not only false but have caused harm to my personal and professional standing as well as my health. Your actions constitute defamation and slander, and I demand that you cease making further false statements and defamatory comments. Failure to do so will leave me no alternative than to explore all remedies available to me.

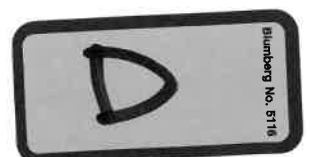
Sincerely,

Hays,
Diana

Digitally signed by
Hays, Diana
Date: 2025.04.01
19:48:57 -04'00'

Diana Hays

cc: John Cafferky, Town Attorney
LaDonna Snellbaker, Human Resources Director



Snellbaker, LaDonna

From: Hays, Diana
Sent: Tuesday, November 18, 2025 3:16 PM
To: Snellbaker, LaDonna
Subject: FW: Tuesday Meeting

Categories: Completed

Here is another.

DIANA HAYS

Assistant Town Manager
Town of Purcellville
540-751-2334 Office | 571-528-1033 Cell
dhays@purcellvilleva.gov | www.purcellvilleva.gov

From: Council Member Nett, Ben <cmbnett@purcellvilleva.gov>
Sent: Monday, July 7, 2025 11:53 AM
To: Fraser, Kwasi <kfraser1@purcellvilleva.gov>
Cc: Bertaut, Christopher <cbertaut@purcellvilleva.gov>; Cafferky, John <jcafferky@bklawva.com>
Subject: Re: Tuesday Meeting

I agree. It is indeed vital to "ensure the Town is not exposed to risk from improper process." I look forward to additional clarification, if any, from the Town Attorney.

Thank you,

Vice Mayor Nett

From: Fraser, Kwasi
Sent: Monday, July 7, 2025 11:39 AM
To: Council Member Nett, Ben
Cc: Bertaut, Christopher; Cafferky, John
Subject: RE: Tuesday Meeting

Good morning Vice Mayor Nett,



Thank you for your message. I acknowledge receipt. As Town Manager, I am obligated to uphold the provisions of the Purcellville Town Charter, the Code of Virginia, and all applicable personnel policies and due process requirements. While I respect Council's legislative authority, I must emphasize that position eliminations, particularly those affecting active personnel, must be handled in accordance with established legal procedures, including budgetary processes and proper classification reviews.

Please also note that the authority to manage staff, including offboarding and reorganization, rests with the Town Manager under Section 4.2 of the Charter. I will ensure that, should Council take any formal action tomorrow, its legality, clarity, and implementation path are reviewed by legal counsel prior to taking administrative steps. This ensures the Town is not exposed to risk from improper process.

In the meantime, I will notify the appropriate department heads to remain available, pending further clarification of Council's action.

Thanks,

Kwasi Fraser

Interim Town Manager

Town of Purcellville

221 S. Nursery Avenue

Purcellville, VA 20132

(571) 479-9611

Kfraser1@PurcellvilleVa.gov

"Innovation is the ability to see change as an opportunity - not a threat" - Steve Jobs

From: Council Member Nett, Ben <cmbnett@purcellvilleva.gov>

Sent: Monday, July 7, 2025 11:31 AM

To: Fraser, Kwasi <kfraser1@purcellvilleva.gov>

Cc: Bertaut, Christopher <cbertaut@purcellvilleva.gov>

Subject: Tuesday Meeting

Mr. Fraser,

Pursuant to Section 5.3 of the Town Code, and faithful to the pledges made to the citizens of Purcellville during the most recent election, a motion will be made at tomorrow's Town Council meeting to eliminate positions deemed no longer necessary for the proper administration of Town Government. If approved by the Council, those position eliminations will take effect immediately. The Town Attorney has provided guidance on this matter.

As Town Manager, it is vital that you and relevant staff are prepared to take immediate action to facilitate offboarding of personnel and maintain the integrity of town records, property, and systems. These potential position eliminations will impact the Administration Department, to include Human Resources.

I urge you to communicate directly with Tassea Smith in Human Resources and the Director of IT in preparation for immediate elimination of positions, if so approved by Town Council.

Please acknowledge receipt.

Respectfully,

Vice Mayor Nett